



Developing potential amongst disabled young people:  
Exploring dance artists' qualities as educators in the  
context of inclusive dance talent development.

Elsa Urmston MSc and Imogen Aujla PhD



Funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

## Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned as part of an Erasmus+ funded project titled IDance, a partnership project between Stopgap Dance Company, Onassis Cultural Centre, Holland Dance and Skånes Dansteater. The objective of this project was 'to give dance educators access to proven methodologies, which are grounded in experience held within inclusive dance companies.' The project enabled Stopgap and its partners to revise and refine existing teaching resources, as well as develop new ones through a series of residencies and trials over an 18-month period, which is available on a designated website (<http://idancenetwork.eu>). As part of this exercise, Stopgap Dance Company was given the opportunity to commission the University of Bedfordshire to seek out any commonalities between dance artists with demonstrative commitment and a track record of developing disabled dance talent. It is intended that this report will shed some light on the personal qualities that enable the successful nurturing of disabled dance talent, which may be useful for dance artists working with disabled and non-disabled young dancers to consider in their own practice. It is also hoped that the findings from this report will be valuable for designing professional development programmes for inclusive dance artists and educators in the future.

Many thanks to dance artists from Stopgap Dance Company, Candoco Dance Company, TIN Arts and other freelance practitioners who contributed to this project.

Researcher and First Author:  
Elsa Urmston MSc PGCAP AFHEA

Researcher and Second Author:  
Imogen Aujla PhD

Interview Transcription:  
Natasha King

For further information about the project findings, please contact Elsa Urmston:  
[elsa.urmston@gmail.com](mailto:elsa.urmston@gmail.com)

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Executive Summary	4
1. Introduction: The context of dance learning for disabled children and young people	5
2. Methods: How the findings were generated	6
3. Results: What the findings mean for dance practice	7
3.1 The dance artist persona	7
3.2 The values of dance artists in inclusive dance settings	10
3.3 The attributes of dance artists in inclusive settings	11
3.4 The practices of dance artists in inclusive settings	13
4. Conclusions	14
5. References	17

## Executive Summary

The aim of this research project was to better understand the values, attributes and practices of dance artists who develop the potential of disabled young dancers. Stopgap Dance Company commissioned researchers at the University of Bedfordshire to explore the range of qualities that highly experienced dance artists demonstrate in their practice, particularly in the context of dance talent development. In order to meet these aims, observations and interviews were conducted with six established contemporary dance artists who work in inclusive settings. Analysis revealed common characteristics in how and why artists go about their work with disabled people. Findings are categorised under four main themes, which are summarised below:

- **The dance persona:** dance artists working with disabled people embody characteristics such as humility, honesty, altruism, kindness, patience and confidence. These qualities drive the way they practice, their beliefs about disability and the content of their classes.
- **The values of dance artists:** dance artists' values are based on celebrating difference, aspiring towards equality, and finding positive examples of practice on which to develop and build their work.
- **The attributes of dance artists:** dance artists' attributes are typified by their investment in their work as part of their learning and professional development. Their attributes are driven by their curiosity as artists to research and learn by doing and reflecting. High expectations and striving towards excellence are a priority in the artists' work, whilst building strong relationships and support for all involved in the communities of learning that they create.
- **The practices of dance artists:** dance artists' practices are wide-ranging with modes of facilitation spanning open-ended and didactic methodologies. Differentiation is a key practice complemented by careful, sensitive and appropriate modes of communication for each individual. Reflection is critical to all the artists' practice not only to evaluate their impact but also as a way of continuing the cycle of development and learning in their practice.

Dance artist persona	Values	Attributes	Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Humility</li><li>•Honesty</li><li>•Being human</li><li>•Dance as art</li><li>•Altruism</li><li>•Kindness</li><li>•Patience</li><li>•Confidence</li><li>•Self-compassion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Celebrating difference</li><li>•Aspiring towards equality</li><li>•Gratifications</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Relationality</li><li>•Striving towards excellence</li><li>•High expectations</li><li>•Learning</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Facilitation</li><li>•Communication</li><li>•Reflection</li></ul>

These findings present the potential for considering how artist training and recruitment of trainee dance artists working in inclusive educational settings is supported.

# 1. Introduction: The context of dance learning for disabled children and young people

Inclusive dance practice ensures that all participants regardless of their prior experience and abilities have an opportunity to dance.<sup>1,2</sup> In an inclusive setting, disabled and non-disabled dancers are taught together in a learning environment which nurtures creativity, aids the development of specific motor skills through movement play, improvisation, and set material, enables self-expression and fosters a sense of belonging for participants to feel part of something that is bigger than themselves.<sup>3-10</sup> In the United Kingdom (UK), inclusion has recently been informed by the introduction of the Creative Case for Diversity by Arts Council England.<sup>11</sup> The aim is to ensure that diversity and equality are embedded into artistic practice and truly represent society by harnessing and actively supporting the potential of artistic talent of people from every background. The focus of the Creative Case initiative is that not only will working with diverse groups of people produce more interesting and ground-breaking work, it is also necessary for the progression and evolution of the art form itself. The Creative Case proposes a move away from tokenistic inclusion of minority groups in art towards meaningful representation and inclusion of society through art. Østern suggests that aesthetic and teaching principles are intertwined to create an inclusive pedagogy in which providing space, valuing difference, meeting, dialoguing, making meaning and having the opportunity to go beyond one's expectations are cornerstones to what makes something inclusive.<sup>12</sup> In short, inclusion allows everyone to access provision in dance and to be met where they are at with equitable opportunities being provided for everyone to flourish and reach their potential. Full integration might be desirable, but appropriate adaptation, translation and mitigation are usually necessary. Thus, a range of socio-political contexts and initiatives inform the values of artists working in education, and specifically with disabled and non-disabled dancers in inclusive settings.

According to Cheesman, there has been an increase in the provision of dance classes for disabled and non-disabled participants internationally.<sup>4</sup> The range of dance provision for disabled young people in the UK is focused largely within community dance contexts or patchy provision within their day-to-day education. Some disabled dancers access dance talent development providers through schemes such as the Centres for Advanced Training. Others progress through youth companies such as Stopgap's Youth Dance Companies. However, most dance classes for disabled young people tend to be recreational in nature and focus on creative dance experiences rather than specific technical development.<sup>13</sup> Increasing focus has been placed on developing realistic and sustainable dance training models for disabled young people in recent years.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, gaps still remain in terms of equal access to formalised dance training for disabled young people who may wish to develop their talent or potential.<sup>13,15,16</sup>

Talent is by its nature difficult to define, but this is particularly true in art forms as changes in aesthetic preferences make it difficult to predict what will be valued in the future. However, talent in dance arguably comprises of physical, artistic and psychological factors.<sup>17</sup> These factors encompass a number of skills and attributes including but not limited to fitness, flexibility, strength, creative and expressive ability, motivation and self-confidence.<sup>17-20</sup> Importantly, a young dancer does not need to have developed each skill to a high degree in order to be considered talented, as strengths in some areas can compensate for weaknesses in others. Many of these skills and attributes can also be developed through training, meaning that the identification of potential as opposed to existing talent is important in order to avoid excluding dancers without prior training from development opportunities.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the role of talent development programmes is to provide high-quality learning and practice opportunities that allow young people to fulfil their potential.<sup>21</sup>

Although a number of barriers to dance exist for disabled young people, such as attitudinal and aesthetic barriers, perhaps the most significant is the lack of systematic training.<sup>13</sup> As a result, several organisations are piloting talent development initiatives to enable disabled young dancers to develop their potential. These include Stopgap Dance Company's IRIS programme, Yorkshire Dance and TIN Arts' Talent Hub, GDance's Dance Unstuck project, and a new action research project by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing into the accessibility of its syllabi. Given this increase in talent development programmes for disabled young dancers, research plays an important role in documenting, evaluating, and disseminating

such work and its outcomes. Equally, dance artists and educators play a significant role in enabling and sustaining such activity. They iterate the importance of equity amongst participants whilst consistently maintaining high expectations of artistic quality and perseverance from dance participants as in mainstream settings.<sup>2-,5,13,22,23,25-27</sup>

Thus, dance artists can create an environment in which everyone can flourish and reach their full potential. Much of the literature reviewed for this project draws from the work of practitioners in general inclusive dance settings rather than talent development-specific contexts, and reveals the qualities of dance artists, educators and teachers implicitly, through their own research enquiry. Whilst much literature points to suitable content for leading dance in inclusive dance settings, with increasing focus being placed on the importance of the influential role that teachers can play on dancers' and students' career aspirations, little is written about the qualities of best practice which inclusive dance artists draw on in their work.<sup>5,7,23,25,28</sup> There is a paucity of robust evidence which explores dance artists' and educators' values and attributes, particularly within talent development contexts for children and young people and even more so amongst disabled and non-disabled children and young people. Having insight into what drives and shapes dance artists' decision-making in the studio might enhance our understanding of the complexities of inclusive dance practice and by talking with artists working with talented disabled and non-disabled young and professional dancers, insight into that very particular context can be better ascertained. It can also help us to better support emerging dance artists working in inclusive settings to adopt values and attributes that can optimise practice.

The dance artists participating in this project identify as artists who educate, rather than being solely teachers of dance. Dance artists typically wear many hats as performer, dancer, creator, or teacher, whether within a dance company or as a freelancer in a portfolio career. For the purposes of this report, the research participants are referred to as dance artists throughout, to respect their identification as artists working within an educational context.

The findings in this report are framed within the context of positive psychology, whereby the authors have sought out the positive qualities of dance artists' work. Findings have been interpreted, where appropriate, through the lens of positive psychology constructs such as altruism and gratifications to create a rationale of what an effective dance artist working in a dance talent context with disabled and non-disabled children and young people might be.

## 2. Methods: How the findings were generated

A two-stage data collection process was undertaken. Firstly, we observed four dance artists representing a range of contexts in which dance participation for disabled people occurs in inclusive youth and professional dance settings. This first stage served to contextualise the artists' practice and allowed for the generation of interview questions. The second stage comprised interviews with six artists including the four artists we observed. Participants were selected based on their experience of working with disabled and non-disabled dancers and their national reputations as exemplars of best practice in inclusive dance settings. All the artists have experience of working with disabled children and young people, in both inclusive settings which centralise socialisation, wellbeing and other health-based outcomes, as well as training contexts which place focus on the development of young people's talent towards careers in dance. Information about the artists is recorded in Table 1 below. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identities.

Table 1: Participants' descriptive data

Pseudonym	Disability	Scope of practice
Anne	None	Freelance performer, rehearsal director and educator. Working with children with behavioural difficulties and disabled and non-disabled professional dancers.
Jane	None	Artistic director. Working with learning disabled children, young people and adults.
Kate	Yes	Freelance dance artist and teacher. Leads youth dance company with disabled and non-disabled young people aged 13-25 years.
Lisa	Yes	Dancer and educator. Working with disabled and non-disabled children and young people aged 13-27 years, younger children and adults.
Alison	None	Artistic director. Working with disabled and non-disabled professional adult dancers.
Helen	None	Artistic director. Working with emerging disabled and non-disabled dance artists and professional dancers.

Observations of classes were of varying duration between one and two and a half hours. Two sessions were workshops for young people aged between 13 and 27 years; the other two sessions took the form of company class with adult disabled and non-disabled professional dancers. Doing so offered insight into the practices employed within the professional setting and a sense of how inclusive learning might be scaffolded from child and youth participation towards professional employment. Observations were structured to watch methods of delivery employed such as the blend of didactic and explorative teaching strategies and how these enabled the class participants to advance their knowledge and understanding through cognitive and embodied means. Language choices were identified alongside the structure and organisation of the session. Through the practical choices made by the artist, an insight into their values and attributes as educators was sought.

After the observations were completed, each participant took part in a semi-structured interview. Two of the interviews were conducted face to face; the other four interviews took place via Skype. The interviews covered themes such as background, training, values in inclusive dance practice, consideration of attributes, skills and practices in dance and opportunities to discuss the application of these within a talent development setting. Data were thematically analysed using an inductive approach, organised first into small themes and then categorised into broader dimensions. Items were further analysed in relation to major themes within the literature.

### 3. Results: What the findings mean for dance practice

Common characteristics which typify the qualities of dance artists working with disabled and non-disabled dancers were identified and organised into four main themes. These include the notion of the dance artist persona, their values, attributes and common practices employed within the studio.

#### 3.1 The dance artist persona

The dance artist or teacher persona is a term that arose from Anne's discussions, and other artists described it as well. It denotes the qualities that the dance artist aims to embody in practice. Some see their dance artist persona as something intrinsic to themselves, which they practice in everyday life. Others see this as a persona that they 'put on' in a teaching setting. This difference seems largely down to personal preference, rather than age, experience or training background per se. When asked what qualities are important in an artist working disabled dancers, the research participants often think of people with whom they have previously worked and describe their inspiring qualities. Later in the conversation, they reflect that perhaps they also own some of these qualities themselves. The following characteristics are typified in much of the inclusive education literature and are traits, which the artists in this study aspire towards, and largely achieve in their practice. The observations reveal their presence as underlying qualities which permeate the ways in which the artists make decisions, interact with participants and develop their own and their participants' artistic voices:

- **Being human:** Being human is typified by all the artists explaining that dancing is where they can most be themselves and where they can learn about themselves and others. All the artists explain the importance of empathy in their everyday lives and dance practice by trying to experience the world from different perspectives. Alison explains that dancing *'helps me to practice relationship, it helps me to be the person I want to be, to share things that I feel are important, to be in a space where I can hear different...perceptions, opinions.'* Helen explains that the teaching role has to be *'down to earth'*, where participants are working and researching together. Being able to relate to and understand others unified by a common interest in dancing is a central feature to the participants' dialogue.

All the artists acknowledge that mistakes are a common occurrence in their working lives. It is the flaws in the artists' practice that help to create their humanness but also allows them to create an environment where people are allowed to be themselves, to have a voice and to reach their full potential. As Alison points out, *'if someone feels seen and feels heard, and has an opportunity to move in a way that ... is deepening their connection to themselves ... then you can do what you want with it [creatively].'*

- **Dance as art:** The participants in this study place dance as art as a central pillar in their practice. A dance as art approach centralises the understanding, making and performing of dance for its own sake, whereby participants can develop expression and critical engagement in dance through kinetic experience, dialogue and appreciation of the art form.<sup>29</sup> This approach is typified by the developing and refining of physical attention and articulation amongst the dancers, giving time to process instructions, ensuring multi-directional communication which draws on imagery, oral description and physical modelling to convey information and feedback.
- **Humility:** The artists discuss this quality thoroughly, but also practise it in how they talk of other inclusive dance practitioners who they perceive as excellent and that they strive to emulate. The artists practise humility through meeting the participants where they are at that day and hold no preconceptions about them. They quietly watch, listen and respond with a person-centred response with the very clear goal of supporting others to flourish. In introducing them in this project as potential experts in their field, many rejected the terms 'expert' and 'excellence', rather explaining their striving towards best practice and the process of learning through working with disabled and non-disabled dancers.
- **Honesty:** Helen focuses on the importance of honesty in setting the scene for the dancers with whom she works. *'You have to be quite transparent; I think you have to be quite up front with people and clear. So, say you have somebody with autism who does disrupt the session quite a lot and takes up a lot of your time, sometimes you're going to have to speak to them beforehand and say, today's session isn't going to be for you, I need to work on the others.'* There appears a need for honesty with participants to ensure that their expectations are managed and realised. Lisa perceives honesty in practice through the teaching dialogue with a dancer, giving an instruction and, despite the response perhaps being very small and taking a long time to arrive, it is usually a very honest response from the dancer themselves.
- **Altruism:** Most of the artists express altruistic qualities. Helen states that she likes to, *'stand up for people that maybe don't have a voice.'* Lisa clarifies that she finds reward in providing opportunities and experiences, which those participating and their families thought would never be possible for them. In practice, the artists' altruism is typified by generous behaviour such as celebrating the small achievements which dancers make in the class, making lots of eye contact as appropriate, smiling, encouraging and noticing everyone's efforts, enabling dancers to have a voice in their practice by leading sections of class, or making suggestions about how the class or group progresses artistically.

These behaviours and qualities place value on subjective experiences. Seligman and Csikszentmihayli identify altruism as valuing civic virtues and moves individuals towards notions such as responsibility, tolerance and contributing to the common good, as well as themselves.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the artists' altruism is not borne out of what Benjamin describes as a misplaced desire to work



with disabled people out of pity.<sup>25</sup> The artists' intentions and practices ensure value is placed on everyone and perhaps aims to build wider societal awareness.

- **Kindness and self-compassion:** Kindness is a quality that Helen identifies as something that she aims towards with her dancers. In observing her class, she provides positive feedback for the dancers, acknowledging and sharing their effort and remarking on the joy that the dancers find in the physical hard work of the class. Observation notes reveal her kindness, *'come on, we are nearly there, phew, this is hard'* [smile, leading to giggle]. *Helen made eye contact with one of the dancers, smiled and rolled her eyes skywards, smiling again, 'it's hard but it feels good, doesn't it, makes you feel like it's all worth it... that was great, brilliant, well done'* [smile, 'phew' as exclamation, rubs dancer on the back]. Alison also affords herself kindness in her role, particularly in navigating the political context of disability as a person without a disability herself, not to excuse any mistakes she may make but to ensure that she accepts her shortcomings as well as reflects on how to develop.
- **Patience:** *'It's massive, massive, massive. You just can't expect to have things happen straight away. They can take years. So, when I first met [dancer], I could see she had some potential,'* explains Helen. This dancer then left but returned to Helen's class after some years. *'She came into my class and she could remember everything I'd taught her and then, gradually over the years, now a correction will only take an afternoon. But it's... patience is massive I think.'*

Traditional dance training tends to be squeezed into a three-year cycle where class lengths are typically 1.5 hours long. The way in which formal dance education is structured has a focus on time, and throughout the literature, time is a key feature of successful dance practice with disabled people.<sup>26,31</sup> Inclusive dance companies require long production periods, long get-in times at theatres due to access and acclimatisation to the venue and the associated support needs of disabled dancers. Learning disabled students require more time to understand instructions and apply feedback. As Aujla and Redding suggest, the pace of learning and performing dance needs to be adapted from the expectations of a context which foregrounds disabled people, and often requires patience as it simply takes longer to achieve certain outcomes.<sup>31</sup>

- **Confidence:** All six participants focus on the importance of feeling confident in their roles. Familiarity and exposure both appear to bolster confidence for the artists. Some of the non-disabled artists cite their exposure to disabled friends and contexts in their childhood and adolescence as helping them to overcome their unfamiliarity with disabled people, where the experience of how a disabled person might move, communicate or think is part of their everyday experience. Such familiarity is also echoed by all the artists in having deep subject knowledge about dance through their training. This mirrors research by Aujla, Nordin-Bates and Redding<sup>24</sup>, and Chua<sup>32</sup>, concerning the importance of knowing dance thoroughly to be able to teach effectively in talent settings. Body knowledge is a foundation for these artists' confidence. Alison explains that, *'you need to be really in your body. You need to be warm. It doesn't mean that you need to be really physically agile or young, but you need to be physically connected, organised, centred so that you can look after your body and respond to someone falling...and to just be available physically.'* As they gain more experience in working with disabled and non-disabled dancers, the artists explain that they have more tools to draw from especially in unexpected moments, but really that there is no shortcut to acquiring these tools. Getting experience and having a go is as important to developing confidence in dance facilitation as formal training. Lisa identifies that as a disabled dance artist her *'whole experience of having to really dissect movement and understand movement and understand the purpose of movement ... gives me ... that starting block with them when I'm building up something, a way of teaching, that I've got that ... experience of dissecting it and I think that makes it much more ... relevant.'* She feels confident because of her own need to translate movement to her body and this experience fuels her confidence in working with disabled and non-disabled dancers. Building experience takes time and learning about how to deliver dance in inclusive settings is perceived as a process of exploration; acknowledging the journey towards expertise can also aid confidence. As Jane explains, *'I understand that I am on a journey – and if everyone in the room agrees to be on that*

*journey, we discover together.*' She goes on to state that the lessons learnt have helped her self-belief. By perceiving the artist persona as a process of research and investigation, confidence can build with experience of dance in an inclusive context.

### 3.2 The values of dance artists in inclusive dance settings

The artists' concepts of disability are based on principles of celebrating difference and aspiring towards equality. All the artists believe that everyone should have the opportunity to dance regardless of their age, experience and background. All the artists cited their understanding of medical, social and cultural models of disability and that knowledge of these theoretical perspectives informs how they practise. For all the artists, as well as those writing about their values in the literature, the creative potential of the moving body is the driving force of their artistic enquiry.<sup>4,22,25</sup> Finding gratification in practice is also a value that drives the artists' work.

- **Celebrating difference:** Alison explains that she has always had issues with categorisation because people's preferences and ideas about who they are and what they do, change. The term inclusivity is problematic particularly when considering the professional dance company context. Alison explains that this stems from societal preconceptions about *'still seeing beauty as a particular aesthetic around certain lines, certain colours, certain composition... you know, while we're making comparative judgements, then you know, we're always going to be in a place where we're having to prove,'* that quality and excellence can still be achieved in inclusive performance work in which heterogeneous groups of people subvert our binary coding of able-disabled and beautiful-ugly. *'I mean that's such a linear, ridiculous, hierarchical, reductionist ... I really hope we can start to have a different conversation around each person's dance, and each person's perception, and each person's performance and... so, I don't have any fears around broadening the perceptions of disability'* (Alison). By celebrating difference, a more advocational tone is adopted by Alison and others.

For Lisa and Anne, difference drives artistic possibilities and for Helen, differences deriving from disability provide new physicalities to explore and harness in creative practice. It requires the artist to place value on the individual, to draw out the dancer's own idiosyncratic movement patterns whilst challenging them to go safely beyond their dancing habits. In observing the artists' practice, scaffolded tasks are a key feature in enabling the differences between people to be navigated in class and equity to be achieved.

- **Aspiring towards equality:** For Helen, equality is represented in the small factors in class where material is shared by all dancers; non-disabled dancers learning disabled dancers' movement material, finding shared torso vocabulary for standing and seated dancers or simply enabling enough time for learning disabled dancers to assimilate and refine movement material. Kate perceives equality holistically, describing it as *'doing our darnedest to make sure that everybody can access [dance] in a way that's worked for them. We won't always get it right, but we'll use our experience and we'll talk to the young people, and we'll be in a constant dialogue with everybody, to make it work and to facilitate that.'* It does not mean that everyone's experience should be the same but being treated as an equal and being able to access, progress and flourish in dance is fundamental to participants' positive experiences. Alison highlights that by talking about talent contexts for disabled dancers brings them into that critical discourse. Although barriers still exist for disabled young people to access talent development opportunities in dance, two artists perceive that disability and equality are more frequently and meaningfully discussed in the last five years. As Lisa states, *'there is definitely more, kind of, realisation of the importance of [disability] and that it is people's responsibility as well.'* As a disabled person, she notices *'how much more, kind of accepted it is... equality, as well, is definitely improving'* although she acknowledges that *'it's never going to be, certainly not in my lifetime, you know, complete equality, because ... it's just the little things that don't [seem to] matter, up to the big sort of disabling barriers, but they're still ... going to be there.'*

- **Gratifications:** Finding gratification is a cornerstone to the dance artists' values. Gratifications are activities we like to do, in this case dancing, teaching and learning within an inclusive context. Seligman describes gratifications as activities in which time stops, our skills match the challenge we face and we are aware of where our strengths lie.<sup>33</sup> Gratifications help us to understand how we function and view the world because of what we place value on. Gratification is characterised most readily by all the artists by witnessing and savouring the joy that their participants find in dancing. Through this positive experience, the artists acknowledge the worth of other people's efforts and appreciate their experiences but also implicitly understand their role in aiding the dancers to reach their full potential, thus informing their value of gratification. Numerous artists explain that participants' success brings gratification especially when a participant perseveres, understands and is able to master a movement that they had found difficult. Kate uses the analogy of a key, *'that we all have different ... doors, and then we have a set of keys. And for each person, we have to learn what keys fit where, and for what doors, and the inclusive environment is just an extension of that. And some days the keys will stick a bit more, and some days that door ain't opening no matter what or some days you'll be able to open a door that you hadn't opened before.'* All the artists seek out the challenges described in this analogy and find gratification in that challenge as well as the successful outcome.

### 3.3 The attributes of dance artists in inclusive settings

The attributes that shape the artists' practice are defined by a focus on learning and evolving practice whilst developing and maintaining relationships with others.

- **Learning:** Developing a learning ethos is central to the artists' attributes both for their own professional development but also for the dancers with whom they are working. All the artists acknowledge that learning occurs for them through the act of doing, practising and working with disabled dancers. Alison says *'I'm learning all the time, I'm learning ... from friends that give me permission and who accept me with all the different colours. That's a constant ground from which I'm operating.'* Kate states for her the learning never stops. As a disabled artist, she wants to know how movement feels or what it does and where it goes for other bodies. Being open to change and remaining curious typifies her learning ethos.

The notion of curiosity is a prevailing attribute in the artists' work and parallels the emphasis on exploring and researching dance with inclusive groups that is reported in the literature. Seligman remarks that curiosity is a key strength that helps to build wisdom and knowledge about the self, the wider context in which one works and one's place in the world.<sup>34</sup> It derives directly from the learning ethos that permeates the artists' practice and is typified by being intrigued by ambiguity. The artists emphasise their openness to change within a dance session where they have a loose plan of what they hope to achieve. Kate explains that *'we kind of know that there's several plans in our head, but we also know that walking into that room means that we... I mean we've always been able to shift, but I think just knowing ... that it might all just be completely different to what you envisioned'*. Alison explains her approach as being *'clear about what you can see and acknowledge the stuff you can't see, hear what's being said and acknowledge to yourself what's not being said.'* The artists' curiosity is fuelled by avoiding preconceptions about the people they work with, worrying less about the nature of a disability and any perceptions of deficit but highlighting participants' strengths. For some artists, it is useful to know in advance the needs of their participants in order to plan how they can deliver material effectively. For others, they are less concerned with this and will often check registration forms which detail students' disabilities after they have met them. It would appear that this factor is dependent on the individual and what helps them to feel most confident in their first exchanges with a participant. The principle of discovery is a central characteristic to the artists' practice and one that really typifies how their curiosity is framed within the classroom. Alison values the *'risks and the surprises and the discoveries as well as the things that, you know, unfold as you imagined.'* This curiosity and discovery are likely reliant on the dance artists' confidence and experience over time.

- **High expectations and striving towards excellence:** The desire to challenge everyone who comes to their classes is important for all the artists, regardless of whether participants are professional or recreational dancers, dancers in training or those who are coming to a dance class for the first time. For Alison, quality is characterised by *'clarity of artistic inquiry. It's about a quality and clarity of artistic expression through the body that you, I, we have, that each person has.'* This perception is echoed by others, whereby training and experience can enhance these factors, but that the heart of the artistic intent is what really shapes high quality art and participation. For Lisa, the value of patience is closely associated to having high expectations. *'We take longer to create our pieces because it takes longer for it to settle on the different bodies and different minds ... the opportunity to do that ... does make for a better-quality piece ... it's really important to actually have that time and that we really kind of know, sort of own, I suppose, the piece.'* Yet, often in educational and participation settings, time is insufficient to really help the students understand, know and embody their dancing. Many of the young people dancing in Lisa and Kate's classes have been attending the classes for a very long time, progress can be slow and does not necessarily fit an ablest timetable.

Rigour in the process of learning to dance is also a vital component of ensuring that high expectations can be met. That is not to say that the importance of enjoyment is compromised, but that rigour and enjoyment can occur side by side. Lisa is keen that children and young people know that they are working towards specific movements and their own translations of those actions. For everyone involved, movement can be achieved. Both Anne and Lisa provide time for the students to repeat, refine and develop their movement accuracy in terms of its shape, dynamic, spatial and temporal constituents. Practice and perseverance translate into achieving high quality artistic outcomes, not just in terms of the thematic ideas, but also how the dancers perform and articulate the material as well.

- **Relationality:** The artists perceive relationality differently: as a form of physical and emotional support for the dancers that they work with as well as for themselves; providing a sense of belonging to the dance community; and helping artists and participants foster meaningful relationships through dancing. Artistically, a group of dancers provides a wealth of creative possibilities, which in itself can bring challenges as Alison explains: *'where there's people in the room, there's challenges. ... There's moods, ... energy levels, ... frustrations, ... different desires, different physical appetites, and different aesthetic values, different expectations on yourself that people bring ... put on themselves and the group. There's different interests in one idea or another ... it's tiring ... we're in close proximity emotionally and psychologically. Speaking different languages, not just you know from different countries, but across art you know ... that's challenging.'* Yet by facing these challenges together, enjoying the process of problem solving and overcoming differences in opinion, physicality and finding common ground, a sense of community develops.

The construct of relationality informs ways of working and is key in ensuring high quality artistic product. As Helen explains *'it's a really collective, a collective practice.'* The importance of feeling connected to other people is a basic psychological need and in much community arts practice the collective development of artwork promotes connection, caring and group cohesion.<sup>35,36</sup> For Helen, this kind of support through *'the amazing bonds, trust, that support network [amongst the dancers] all feeds the process,'* whereby building a community through dance practice aids the creation of good quality work as well. Kate is keen to connect with her colleagues and the dancers in her groups at a human level, genuinely asking how people are because she cares, but also because it informs how she works with the people she is dancing with that day. The dialogue around the dancing is important in getting to know people and offering reciprocal support to each other. Time is given for the dancers to check in at the start of the class with one another, the stories of their lives and how they are feeling. At the end of the observed classes there was time to recover, focus on the sensations of the body but also reconnect with one another socially and discuss the outcomes of the class. This approach fosters belonging, trust and non-judgment amongst the participants, and exemplifies the theoretical construct of relatedness in Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory.<sup>35</sup> A shared sense of praxis begins to emerge, where the individual is welcomed and difference is celebrated, but where commonalities

are found through sharing and learning about dance together. The artists and their participants find friends and form a community with a shared focus. Relationality, then, is a key quality, which dance artists foster through their practice, both for themselves and for others.

### 3.4 The practices of dance artists in inclusive settings

The specific practices, class content and ways of working that the six artists employ are wide-ranging and listing each artist's classroom practices is beyond the scope of this report. There are, nevertheless, common practice-based themes that appear as important qualities for the dance artist to adopt in the studio.

- **Facilitation:** Modes of facilitation are varied, spanning creative, open-ended, improvisatory approaches to specific didactic teaching of dance phrases. At the heart of the work is the spirit of differentiation, ensuring equitable access to material for disabled and non-disabled dancers, a key feature of flexible, effective teaching practice in most pedagogical settings.<sup>37</sup> The artists have to be resourceful and seek out opportunities to differentiate and often this will take the shape of providing lots of choice within an activity. Lisa models a movement phrase in her wheelchair and brings a standing dancer to the front of the class to model a standing version of the same phrase as she teaches. She watches the dancers carefully, providing specific feedback about dynamic and spatial orientation to different dancers in order to bring about specificity in the dancers' movements. Whilst the dancers do not look the same, they are fulfilling the main aim of the activity in different ways. Alison carefully scaffolds an improvisatory warm up for the professional dancers, inviting the dancers to interpret carefully chosen words that foster their curiosity in moving and encourage the gradual physiological and psychological preparation that they need prior to the performance. Facilitating translation of material and individual responses to instructions is placed at the centre of the artists' inclusive dance practice.
- **Communication:** Effective and appropriate communication with dancers is a common quality which the artists identify as central to their practice. Language choice is carefully considered to ensure that the dancers can understand what is being asked and often the artists repeat themselves throughout the class to ensure comprehension. As Anne develops her artistic practice, she finds herself relying more and more on objects which are translatable into dance stimuli or that capture a quality of the movement that she seeks. She explains, *'I'm trying to make lots of objects and to describe their function to create a logic of [the] moving body ... using the fabric and like a hanger and a sort of spine, you know, trying to show [the] mechanics of moving body.'* Physical images help the artists to translate their intentions especially when words are insufficient. Metaphorical imagery is a mainstay of the language that the artists use to communicate intention, quality and execution of movement. Thinking of a battement tendu as a rocket enables the quality of the sharp, escaping leg to be translated as a clear movement aim in translation in Lisa's class. Onomatopoeic words such as *'snake'* and sound utterances such as *'ssssss'* aid the fullest possible articulation of the spinal column for the dancers in Helen's class. Non-preferential language is also used to ensure equality across the group of dancers. Helen uses the term *'the shape of your base'* as the neutral position that standing dancers might call *'standing in parallel.'* When warming up, Helen directs the dancers to change the shape of their base, using vocabulary that is interpretable but that is a common language which the dancers understand. Everybody shifts their position whether standing, sitting or lying.

As the artists reflect back to their early experiences of working in inclusive settings, they recall their careful planning of what to say to the point of writing it down word-for-word. As their experience has grown, the need to write down instructions has lessened and the appropriate language is more available to them because of their familiarity with it. They are able to be responsive to the people and activity in the moment, as their confidence has developed.

Feedback and questioning are key features of the artists' practice, used to check on what the students have learnt but also helping to identify gaps in knowledge or awareness. Questioning is a common practice in dance education.<sup>23, 38</sup> Chappell and colleagues document educators' use of questions to stimulate creative challenges amongst students as well as the role of the

‘questioning narrator’ where ‘questions accompany and challenge the students whilst they are moving, improvising and performing to promote a connection between the moving body and the thinking mind’ (p. 67). The questions posed by the artists in this project echo the desire to get the dancers actively thinking about their decision-making whilst dancing and to pay attention to the details of their movement vocabulary.

- **Reflection:** As with effective practice in reflective pedagogical settings, planning and reflection is as important as the delivery process for most of the artists in this project.<sup>39</sup> For Helen, this involves planning for the practicalities of, for example, moving out of a wheelchair to be on the floor, and ensuring that the next section of class does not require a quick return into the chair again. Lisa acknowledges that she thinks really thoroughly about how she is going to deliver material to ensure that her class is practically accessible to the varying needs of all the participants. In contrast, Alison remarks, *‘I have a very clear intention for every session, whether that’s a kind of physical goal or creative task or I want the group to, you know, experience a certain thing ... I have a very, very clear intention and I now, increasingly, have no idea how I’m going to get there.’* For Alison, the overall goal is very clear, but the detailed minutiae of how to get there is not the focus of her planning. It would appear, then, that different ways of planning are equally as effective when trying to determine best practice in inclusive settings. Reflection in the moment allows Jane to *‘read [the] room – go with the flow. Work at the pace of the group, not [my] pace.’* Meticulous planning and reflection seem crucial to ensure that the participants remain at the forefront of one’s practice, whilst still ensuring effective mechanics of delivery and communication. Kugel’s hierarchy of pedagogical competence suggests that one is often concerned with one’s own performance and the subject matter at hand with a focus on ‘emphasising teaching’ being manifest as an early-career artist. As familiarity grows, the emphasis moves towards enabling learners to learn, shifting students towards greater independence in the pedagogical process.<sup>40</sup>

## 4. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore dance artists’ qualities as educators of disabled children and young people, with the particular aim of understanding more about the artists’ values and attributes and how this may impact effective pedagogy within a talent development context. A key, underlying factor for all the artists in this study, which reflects wider dance and disability discourse, is the value placed on the celebration of difference with an aim of working towards greater equity of opportunity and access to dance participation across the board and very specifically for disabled young people who wish to realise their potential. This grounding value informs the notion of a ‘dance artist persona’, a range of qualities which act as cornerstones to what the practitioner believes and how they choose to relate to, and create dance with disabled people. These artists did not perceive themselves as experts in their field, but more comfortably described their practice as a learning journey, in which they experience, refine and develop their ways of working as a result of the people they encounter. The qualities of kindness, generosity, patience, honesty and humility typify the affective support reflected in other dance talent research<sup>23</sup> and more general inclusive dance practice.<sup>22, 23</sup> These qualities determine and describe how the artist acts, what they do and how they relate to bring out the best in the people with whom they work as well as themselves. The attributes of curiosity, alongside perseverance and having high expectations drive the striving towards excellence which exemplifies practice in mainstream dance talent settings too.<sup>2,5,24</sup>

Two key implications have emerged from the findings. Firstly, it is clear that experience is a key factor for the dance artists in feeling confident in what they do. The dance artists’ experience ranged from eight to 28 years. By practising for this length of time, the artists have experienced a wide variety of people, in different settings and with wide-ranging abilities. The pure range of experiences that the artists have encountered over this time has enabled them to build a toolbox of dance content, as well as ways of working which they can draw on. Whilst some of these devices can no doubt be taught in professional development and tertiary education settings, the opportunity to try things out, make mistakes and refine one’s own approach in a supportive environment but without judgment from others, is vital.

Secondly, a clear related theme emerging from the artists' dialogue is their attitude towards life-long learning. Each artist explains the importance of learning with their participants and ensuring that they have time to reflect on their experiences meaningfully. This appears as a rigorous process that is, at times, implicitly situated in the moment of teaching and more formally acknowledged in the planning and development of future dance sessions or in the progression of their practice. Of equal importance within this process is practising self-compassion too, acknowledging one's fears and failings, and always seeking ways to overcome these and adapt ways of working methods which develop practice.

The application of these findings lies in dance artists adopting these characteristics in their own practice. It is feasible that these findings can be a focus in artists' professional development training programmes, encouraging artists to reflect on their persona, their values and the attributes that drive their practice. In-training and early-career opportunities which prioritise opportunities to observe, assist and shadow established artists in inclusive settings would support emerging dance artists to gather experience. This could include informal internships for students still in training, as well as mentoring programmes for artists moving into leading dance in inclusive dance settings. As emerging artists gain experience and confidence, opportunities to co-lead may arise and progression towards greater independence can be fostered. Importantly, emerging dance artists must be supported in their efforts, where reflecting on and learning from mistakes is central to the mentoring process. It is clear that the spirit of non-judgement and trust is vital in developing the skills and sensitivity needed to work with disabled and non-disabled people. Simple reflective practices of maintaining a working journal to keep track of gratifications and challenges in teaching may be one tangible way of encouraging artists to reflect on their practice. Engaging in peer-to-peer discussions and sharing practice can also help to support emerging artists to feel that they belong to a community of practice with successes, challenges and progression in common. Indeed, the notion of relationality is as important amongst professional colleagues as it is for the participants in inclusive dance sessions. It is also important that artists reflect 'in and on action', in the moment of the teaching exchange with their participants, as well as thoroughly debriefing afterwards.<sup>41</sup> The mentor needs to support their mentee with empathy and compassion, balancing the provision of advice alongside support for the emerging artist's discovery of themselves in this role. A combination of these approaches can help the artist find their persona in the role of leading inclusive dance.

Supporting emerging dance artists to develop can be achieved not only by increasing opportunities for leading or co-leading and shadowing others' practice, but also by encouraging them to consider their background, influences and beliefs about how they view the world and why that might be. Asking them how the guiding principles in their lives manifest in their everyday living will help to bring values into sharper focus and consider how they enact them in life and in dance practice. Acknowledging that values inform the learning process will also help the artists' values shift as their confidence and experience develops.

Facilitation strategies can be taught in training and professional development opportunities. For example, the principles of differentiation and translation of movement material require the dance artist to maintain focus on the key movement aims of an action and work from these aims to devise different ways of achieving the movement that are equitable in terms of transfer of weight, dynamics, relational proximity or spatial and directional orientation. Whilst specific teaching strategies can be taught, opportunities to see translation of movement material is, in itself, very useful for the emerging artist, as well as explicit discussion with a mentor of how the artist made decisions about the translation. As experience and confidence develop, emerging artists can relinquish control and facilitate their participants to take responsibility for the translation themselves. Again, such facilitation strategies can be addressed in training and professional development processes, alongside the opportunity to practice them on-the-job.

The qualities of the dance artist are, thus, multi-faceted. Their qualities inform what they believe and how they think. Their qualities direct how they behave and the choices they make. Their qualities help to shape content and practice and act as the reflexive process to develop and evolve. When considering these research findings in light of the current literature, there appear to be similarities between dance artists' qualities in inclusive dance education contexts and dance talent settings for children and young people. The dance artists in the present study describe their practice as a learning journey, reflecting the

life-long learning principles of dance teachers described in talent development research in which curiosity and discovery are cornerstones of the practice.<sup>4,23</sup> Perseverance and high expectations are accentuated in the dance artists' dialogue and reflect the importance of striving towards excellence as a theme in dance talent writings.<sup>4,10,24,26</sup> Developing relationships, enabling social support and fostering belonging are also key ingredients in creating successful dance talent development environments and are commonly discussed throughout the inclusive dance education literature too.<sup>4,8,18,22,32</sup> It would seem, then, that there is opportunity for crossover between talent development contexts and inclusive education settings. Shared principles and ways of working appear to already exist, but access for disabled dancers to talent development settings is limited. Fostering shared knowledge and expertise with opportunities to gather more experience and confidence across both learning contexts seems both warranted and worthwhile.



## 5. References

1. Amans, D. (2017). *An introduction to community dance practice*. London: Palgrave.
2. Reinders, N., Fletcher, P. & Bryden, P. (2015). Dreams do come true: The creation and growth of a recreational dance program for children and young adults with additional needs. *Journal of Dance Education*, 15(3), 100–109.
3. Zitomer, R. (2017). Always being on your toes: Elementary school dance teachers' perceptions of inclusion and their roles in creating inclusive dance education environments. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 21(4), 428–440.
4. Cheesman, S. (2017). Issues and challenges around the fostering of a productive respectful community ethos within an integrated/inclusive class context. *Dance Research Aotearoa*, 5(1), 99–112.
5. Morris, M. L., Baldeon, M. & Scheuneman, D. (2015). Developing and sustaining an inclusive dance program: Strategic tools and methods. *Journal of Dance Education*, 15(3), 122–129.
6. Block, B. A. & Johnson, P. V. (2011). The adapted dance process. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 82(2), 16–23.
7. Cone, T. P. & Cone, S. L. (2011). Strategies for teaching dancers of all abilities. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 82(2), 24–31.
8. Whatley, S. (2007). Dance and disability: The dancer, the viewer and the presumption of difference. *Research in Dance Education*, 8(1), 5–25.
9. Kaufmann, K. (2006). *Inclusive creative movement and dance*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
10. Darbyshire, C. & Nilsen, S. (2001). Investigating inclusive teaching practice. *Independent Dance*.
11. Arts Council England. (2018). What is the creative case for diversity? Retrieved from <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/how-we-make-impact/diversity>
12. Østern, T. P. (2018). Developing inclusive dance pedagogy: Dialogue, activism and aesthetic transformative learning. In *Dance, access and inclusion: Perspectives on dance, young people and change*. (pp. 12–19). London: Routledge.
13. Aujla, I. J. & Redding, E. (2013). Barriers to training for young people with disabilities. *British Journal for Special Education*, 40(2).
14. Dance 4. (2010). *Changing perceptions*. Nottingham: Dance 4.
15. Tomasic, M. (2014). Developing curricula and assessment tools for the physically integrated dance class. In *2013 VSA Intersections: Arts and Special Education: A Jean Kennedy Smith Arts and Disability Program: Exemplary Programs and Approaches*. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.
16. Verrent, J. (2003). Disability and the dance and drama awards report. DfES.
17. Walker, I. J., Nordin-Bates, S. & Redding, E. (2010). Talent identification and development in dance: A review of the literature. *Research in Dance Education*, 11(3), 167–191.
18. Aujla, I. J., Nordin-Bates, S., Redding, E., & Jobbins, V. (2014). Developing talent among young dancers: Findings from the UK Centres for Advanced Training. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 5(1), 15–30.
19. Aujla, I. J. & Farrer, R. (2015). The role of psychological factors in the career of the independent dancer. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1688.
20. Chua, J. (2014). Dance talent development across the lifespan: A review of current research. *Research in Dance Education*, 15(1), 23–53.
21. Williams, A. M., and Reilly, T. (2000). Talent identification and development in soccer. *Journal of Sport Sciences*, 18, 657–67.
22. Buck, R. & Snook, B. (2018). Values and principles shaping community dance. In *Dance, access and inclusion: Perspectives on dance, young people and change*. (pp. 37–44). London: Routledge.
23. Chua, J. (2017). The influences of an exemplary ballet teacher on students' motivation: 'The Finnish Way'. *Research in Dance Education*, 18(1), 3–22.
24. Aujla, I. J., Nordin-Bates, S. & Redding, E. (2014). A qualitative investigation of commitment to dance: Findings from the UK Centres for Advanced Training. *Research in Dance Education*, 15(2), 138–160.
25. Benjamin, A. (2013). *Making an entrance: Theory and practice for disabled and non-disabled dancers*. London: Routledge.
26. Band, S. A. Lindsay, G., Neelands, J. & Freakley, J. (2011). Disabled students in the performing arts: Are we setting them up to succeed? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(9), 891–908.

27. Albright, A. C. (1997). *Choreographing difference: The body and identity in contemporary dance*. Middletown, Connecticut, USA: Wesleyan.
28. Pickard, A. & Bailey, R. (2009). Crystallising experiences among young elite dancers. *Sport, Education and Society*, 14(2), 165–181.
29. McCutchen, B.P. (2006). *Teaching dance as art in education*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
30. Seligman, M. E. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Special issue on happiness, excellence, and optimal human functioning. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–183.
31. Aujla, I. & Redding, E. (2012). The identification and development of talented young dancers with disabilities. *Research in Dance Education*, 15(1), 54–70.
32. Chua, J. (2015). The role of social support in dance talent development. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 38(2), 169–195.
33. Seligman, M. E. (2011). *Flourish: A new understanding of happiness and wellbeing: The practical guide to using positive psychology to make you happier and healthier*. London: Nicholas Brealy Publishing.
34. Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. Simon and Schuster.
35. Deci, E. L. and Ryan, R. M. (2011). Self-determination theory. In *Handbook of theories of social psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 416–433). Sage Publications.
36. Lowe, S. S. (2000). Creating community: Art for community development. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 29(3), 357–386.
37. Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. Minnesota, USA: The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
38. Chappell, K. (2011). Journeys of becoming: Humanising creativity. In *Close encounters dance partners for creativity*. (pp. 89–100). Trentham.
39. Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Pearson Education.
40. Kugel, P. (1993). How professors develop as teachers. *Studies in Higher Education*, 18(3), 315–328.
41. Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. London: Temple Smith.